



WHAT IS READABILITY?



MANAGEMENT STAFF
RECORDS MANAGEMENT DIVISION

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THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE SEPTEMBER 1954 READER'S DIGEST AND WELL ILLUSTRATES THE MEANING OF READABILITY. IT ALSO FURNISHES INTERESTING INFORMATION ON EFFECTIVE RECORDS MANAGEMENT:

"DON'T FILE IT- THROW IT AWAY!"

BY WILLIAM MILLER

ARE YOU A HOARDER ? DON'T ANSWER TOO HASTILY; THE HOARDING INSTINCT RUNS DEEP IN THE HUMAN TRIBE. BEFORE YOU DISCLAIM IT, TAKE A LOOK IN THAT CLOSET YOU DON'T OPEN ANY MORE BECAUSE OF THE JUNK PILED IN IT.

I KNOW ABOUT THOSE THINGS. AMONG THE MISCELLANY I HAVE STORED OVER THE YEARS ARE ALL THE CHECKS I HAVE WRITTEN FOR TWO DECADES. I JUST CAN'T BEAR TO THROW ANYTHING AWAY.

FORTUNATELY MAN'S AGE-OLD HOARDING MANIA HAS AT LAST ENCOUNTERED A SPECIALIST WHO, IF HE CANNOT CURE IT, AT LEAST AMELIORATES IT. HE IS EMMET J. LEAHY, A SKINNY, BESPECTACLED, SOLEMN-LOOKING CHAP OF 42 WHO IS RAPIDLY GETTING RICH BY TEACHING PEOPLE HOW TO THROW THINGS AWAY. LAST YEAR LEAHY AND CO., OF NEW YORK, WHICH HE OWNS, MADE A PROFIT OF \$100,000.

ONLY THE QUIRKS OF FATE SAVED LEAHY FROM BECOMING A SQUIRREL LIKE THE REST OF US. A NATIVE OF WASHINGTON, D.C., THE VERY HEART OF FILING-CASE TERRITORY, HE LANDED A JOB IN 1935 AS AN ARCHIVIST WITH THE U.S. GOVERNMENT'S NATIONAL ARCHIVES. FOR A TIME HE PILED UP PAPER AS UNHIBITEDLY AS ANYONE. THEN DESTINY KNOCKED ON HIS DOOR. IT WAS SUDDENLY DISCOVERED THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S NEW UMPTEEN-MILLION-DOLLAR BUILDING, CONSTRUCTED TO HOUSE ALL GOVERNMENT ARCHIVES, WOULD HOLD ONLY ABOUT FOUR PERCENT OF EXISTING RECORDS. FOUR MEN WERE GIVEN THE JOB OF FIGURING OUT WHICH PAPERS TO KEEP. LEAHY WAS ONE OF THEM.

HE THINNED THINGS OUT SO WELL THAT WHEN WORLD WAR II CAME ALONG, SECRETARY OF THE NAVY FRANK KNOX SENT FOR HIM. KNOX NEEDED MORE SPACE WHICH IN THOSE PRE-PENTAGON DAYS COULD NOT BE FOUND. THE ONLY WAY TO PROVIDE IT WAS TO CLEAR OUT NEEDLESS FILES FROM THE EXISTING SPACE. LEAHY PITCHED IN- AND ALSO PITCHED OUT. AFTER THE WAR THE NAVY GAVE HIM A CITATION CREDITING HIM WITH SAVING THE GOVERNMENT 21 MILLION DOLLARS IN FOUR YEARS.

WHAT IS READABILITY (CONTINUED)

HERBERT HOOVER ASKED LEAHY TO DIRECT THE HOOVER COMMISSION'S STUDY ON HOW THE GOVERNMENT COULD IMPROVE ITS RECORDS MANAGEMENT (THAT IS, HOW TO STOP PILING UP SO MUCH PAPER). LEAHY'S REPORT, SUBMITTED TO CONGRESS BY HOOVER IN 1949, WAS APPROVED AND IS BEING PUT INTO EFFECT PIECEMEAL. AS A RESULT, THE GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION, THE GOVERNMENT'S BIGGEST HOUSEKEEPING AGENCY, HAS REDUCED ITS PURCHASE OF FILING CABINETS FROM THE 1949-51 AVERAGE OF 77,000 PER YEAR TO A 1952-54 AVERAGE OF 28,000.

LEAHY'S HOOVER COMMISSION EXPERIENCE CONVINCED HIM THAT THE MONEY WASTE OF DEAD FILES WAS GREATER THAN HE HAD BELIEVED. (LATER WHEN HE MADE A SURVEY FOR NEW YORK CITY HE FOUND EIGHT FLOORS OF A BUILDING CRAMMED WITH RECORDS. HE REDUCED THE SPACE NEEDED TO ONE HALF OF ONE FLOOR). BUT HE ASSUMED THAT WHAT WAS TRUE OF INEFFICIENT GOVERNMENT COULD ^{NEVER} BE TRUE OF THE RAZOR-KEEN, COMPETITIVE BUSINESS WORLD. SURELY THE GREAT MASTERS OF EFFICIENCY HAD CONQUERED THE PROBLEM OF HANDLING THEIR FILES. CONSEQUENTLY, HE WAS HESITANT ABOUT TRYING TO SELL HIS SERVICES TO BIG CORPORATIONS. BUT ONE DAY IN 1949 HE MADE A TENTATIVE, EXPERIMENTAL VISIT TO EASTERN AIRLINES, WHERE HE OFFERED TO PROVE THAT MONEY WAS BEING WASTED BY STORING NEEDLESS PAPER.

ONLY THOSE WHO KNOW EDDIE RICKENBACKER, EASTERN'S PRESIDENT CAN APPRECIATE LEAHY'S TEMERITY. CAPTAIN RICKENBACKER, PROUD OF HIS SPARTAN ECONOMY, DESCRIBES HIS MANAGEMENT SERVICE THUS: "FIRST WE CATCH THE PENNIES AND THEN WE WATCH THE MILLS." LEAHY PROVED HIS CONTENTION SO CONCLUSIVELY, HOWEVER, THAT TODAY HE STILL WATCHES OVER A LARGE PART OF EASTERN'S RECORDS.

WHEN LEAHY'S ACHIEVMENT WITH RICKENBACKER BECAME KNOWN, IT WAS IMPRESSIVE TO BUSINESSMEN AS THE NEWS WOULD BE TO GOLFERS THAT BEN HOGAN HAD ASKED AN UNKNOWN CADDY TO TEACH HIM HIS GRIP. TODAY HIS CLIENTS INCLUDE SOME OF AMERICA'S BIGGEST AND BEST-KNOWN CORPORATIONS.

LEAHY'S MESSAGE BOILS DOWN TO THIS: "DON'T FILE IT-THROW IT AWAY!" BUT HOW DOES HE TRACK DOWN THE ALREADY-EXISTING DEAD WASTE AND GET RID OF IT?

HIS METHODS ARE SIMPLE. AN AVERAGE-SIZED COMPANY USUALLY SAVES 800 TO 1200 DIFFERENT KINDS OF RECORDS. LEAHY COMPILES AN INDEX SHOWING WHAT THESE RECORDS ARE AND WHERE THEY ARE. IN MOST COMPANIES HIS INDEX GIVES

WHAT IS READABILITY? (CONTINUED)

FOR THE FIRST TIME A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF ALL THE RECORDS BEING KEPT. INVARIABLY IT TURNS UP NEEDLESS DUPLICATION. FOR EXAMPLE: A BILLING DEPARTMENT USUALLY KEEPS ONE SET OF BILLS SENT OUT, WHILE THE ACCOUNTS-RECEIVABLE DEPARTMENT, WHICH COLLECTS THE MONEY WHEN IT IS PAID, KEEPS ANOTHER.

FROM LONG EXPERIENCE LEAHY KNOWS THAT AT LEAST 40 PERCENT OF ALL CORPORATE RECORDS CAN BE THROWN AWAY. BUT WHERE TO BEGIN ?

HE NEVER ASKS TOP MANAGEMENT; NOR DOES HE PUT THE QUESTION UP TO A COMMITTEE. "THAT WAY LIES MORE PAPER," HE SAYS. HE GOES TO MINOR MANAGERS WHOSE DEPARTMENTS HAVE ACCUMULATED THIS PAPER, EXPLAINS WHAT THE LAW REQUIRES (FEW STATE LAWS REQUIRE THAT RECORDS OF TRANSACTIONS BE KEPT LONGER THAN SIX YEARS), AND ASKS THEM TO DECIDE HOW MUCH OF THE STUFF CAN BE DESTROYED AND WHAT CAN BE MOVED OUT OF CURRENT FILES INTO WAREHOUSE STORAGE. WHEN ALL DECISIONS ARE IN HAND HE GOES TO THE TOP MANAGEMENT AND SAYS, "HERE'S WHAT YOUR MEN TELL ME THEY CAN DISPOSE OF."

TIDY SUMS ARE REALIZED BY SELLING THE WASTE PAPER. ONE COMPANY, FOR INSTANCE, GOT RID OF 80 TONS FOR \$1265.

LEAHY CONTENDS THAT IN ADDITION TO THE BASIC 40 PERCENT OF THE AVERAGE COMPANY'S RECORDS WHICH CAN ALWAYS BE DESTROYED, HALF THE REST CAN BE THROWN AWAY, EXCEPT THAT THE COST OF WINNOWING MAKES IT CHEAPER TO MOVE INTO LOW-COST STORAGE. THUS ONLY 30 PERCENT OF A COMPANY'S RECORDS NEED TO BE KEPT ON HAND. THE RESULTING SAVINGS ON HIGH-COST OFFICE SPACE ARE TREMENDOUS. ACTUALLY, HE SAYS, ONLY ABOUT FOUR PERCENT OF ALL THE RECORDS ARE WORTH KEEPING PERMANENTLY- WHICH INCLUDES SUCH ITEMS AS MINUTES OF DIRECTORS' MEETINGS AND NOTES OF HISTORICAL NATURE.

TO PROVIDE LOW-COST STORAGE, LEAHY HAS TAKEN SPACE IN A WAREHOUSE ON MANHATTAN'S LOWER WEST SIDE. HERE, AT A CHARGE TO HIS CLIENTS OF ONE DOLLAR A YEAR PER SQUARE FOOT, HE STORES RECORDS THAT EASTERN AIRLINES AND ABOUT 100 OTHER COMPANIES HAS BEEN PAYING UP TO \$5 A SQUARE FOOT TO KEEP IN HOME-OFFICE LOCATIONS. INSTEAD OF PUTTING THE RECORDS IN STEEL FILING CABINETS, WHICH COST \$90 APIECE, HE KEEPS THEM IN CARDBOARD BOXES STACKED IN ROWS OF OPEN METAL SHELVES REACHING ALMOST TO THE CEILING.

WHAT IS READABILITY? (CONTINUED)

UP AND DOWN THESE ROWS ROAM CLERKS WEARING MINER'S LAMPS ON THEIR FOREHEADS. EACH MAN HAS A TELEPHONE HEADSET AND EARPHONES AND SPEAKER, AND CARRIES A PLUG-IN TELEPHONE CORD COILED ON HIS ARM. IF EASTERN AIRLINES WANTS TO KNOW WHETHER JOE DOE USED HIS PURCHASED TICKET ON THE NIGHT OF DECEMBER 27, 1947 (THE NIGHT OF THE BIG BLIZZARD), ONE OF LEAHY'S CLERKS CAN PROVIDE THE ANSWER. HE SIMPLY PLUGS IN HIS PHONE, LEARNS THE FILE NUMBER, MOVES DOWN THE AISLE UNTIL HE FINDS IT. IN FIVE MINUTES HE CAN TELEPHONE BACK WHETHER IT WAS USED, CANCELED OR REFUNDED.

THE COST OF THIS SERVICE IS INCLUDED IN LEAHY'S CHARGE FOR KEEPING OLD RECORDS IN HIS RESPOSITORY. AS AN ILLUSTRATION AS TO HOW NEEDLESS SUCH RECORDS REALLY ARE, LEAHY POINTS OUT THAT OF EVERY 2000 PAPERS HE STORES ONLY ONE IS SOUGHT IN A YEAR.

LEAHY'S MANHATTAN STORAGE SCHEME WAS SUCH A SUCCESS THAT HE BUILT A MORE AMBITIOUS WAREHOUSE IN NEW JERSEY. A TELEPHONE TIE-IN PERMITS THE SAME KIND OF QUICK FILE SEARCH TO BE MADE FOR ANY CLIENT. SIMILAR WAREHOUSES ARE PLANNED FOR PHILADELPHIA AND CHICAGO.

FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO WANT TO AVOID CLUTTERING UP THEIR HOMES WITH NEEDLESS RECORDS, LEAHY ALSO HAS SOME TIPS. THE BIGGEST BUGABOO IS THE INCOME TAX, AND HE RECOMMENDS A LITTLE GADGET CALLED THE "INCOME TAX PROOF KIT," WHICH CAN BE GOT AT ANY STATIONER'S. LIKE A BUDGET ENVELOPE, IT HAS SECTIONS IN WHICH RECORDS OF SUCH THINGS AS DEDUCTIBLE EXPENDITURES CAN BE FILED AS THEY ACCUMULATE, THUS AVOIDING THE 11TH HOUR SCRAMBLE FOR MISLAID FILES.

UNLESS YOUR INCOME IS MORE THAN \$25,000. YOU DON'T NEED TO KEEP YOUR INCOME-TAX PROOFS FOR MORE THAN FOUR YEARS. (REASON: LEAHY'S PLAN FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT NOW RESULTS IN ALL THESE RETURNS BEING DESTROYED AFTER FOUR YEARS).

THE MOST IMPORTANT RECORDS YOU NEED TO KEEP ARE YOUR BIRTH CERTIFICATE AND YOUR WILL. (THEY ARE ALSO THE ONES MOST OFTEN UNAVAILABLE WHEN NEEDED.) A GOOD FAMILY INVESTMENT IS A SMALL FIRE-RESISTANT STRONGBOX WHICH WILL SAFEKEEP THESE RECORDS PLUS DOCUMENTS SUCH AS MORTGAGES, DEEDS, INSURANCE POLICIES. CANCELED CHECKS NEED NOT BE KEPT LONGER THAN SIX YEARS PLUS THE CURRENT YEAR. "IF HOUSEHOLD RECORDS AREN'T PURGED PERIODICALLY," SAYS LEAHY, "YOU'LL HAVE TO ADD AN ARCHIVES ROOM INSTEAD OF THAT RUMPUS ROOM YOU WANT."

WHAT IS READABILITY?(CONTINUED)

NEEDLESS TO SAY, LEAHY KEEPS HIS OWN WASTEBASKET BUSY. IN HIS OFFICE HE HAS ONLY ONE FILING CABINET OF FOUR DRAWERS FOR HIS OWN BUSINESS RECORDS. AND, HE SAYS GRIMLY, "AS SOON AS IT FILLS UP WE CLEAR IT OUT."

WHAT MAKES WRITING READABLE ? HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS. USE THE ACTIVE VOICE WHEREVER POSSIBLE. INFORMAL WORDS SUCH AS PERSONAL PRONOUNS ARE AN AID. THIS ARTICLE HAS NO LESS THAN 70. THE AUTHOR HAS USED SEVEN CONTRACTIONS. THEY ARE HELPFUL ALSO. PLENTY OF VERBS ARE A SIGN OF A GOOD WRITER. MR. MILLER USED OVER 270. VERB-ADVERB COMBINATIONS ARE EXCELLENT WITH FEWER NOUNS AND ADJECTIVES. PREPOSITIONS SHOULD BE KEPT TO A MINIMUM AS WELL AS THE SIX OVERWORKED VERBS: MAKE, TAKE, HAVE, GIVE, HOLD AND BE. OMIT SUPERFLUOUS AND TRITE WORDS AND PHRASES.

PUNCTUATION FOR READABILITY IS IMPORTANT. A GOOD RULE IS TO USE FEW COMMAS.

SENTENCE LENGTHS SHOULD VARY TO AVOID JERKINESS. THE ACCEPTED AVERAGE IS FROM 17 TO 23 WORDS. THIS ARTICLE AVERAGES 17.6 WORDS TO A SENTENCE.

PLAIN AND SIMPLE SPEECH APPEALS TO ALL. IT SHOWS CLEAR THOUGHT. THIS ARTICLE IS SIMPLY WORDED. IT AVERAGES 28.8 SYLLABLES TO A SENTENCE. AN ACCEPTABLE AVERAGE IS ANYTHING UNDER 65 SYLLABLES.

NO ARBITRARY STANDARD HAS BEEN SET FOR PARAGRAPH LENGTHS. ONE AUTHORITY HAS STATED THAT ONE UNDER 100 WORDS OR ONE-THIRD OF A PAGE IS CONSIDERED SHORT BUT OVER 300 WORDS IS TOO LONG. ANOTHER STANDARD HAS BEEN SET AT 8 TO 12 LINES OF ORDINARY PAGE SIZE. OUR STORY, ALTHOUGH NOT ON AVERAGE-SIZED PAGES, AVERAGES 10.5 LINES TO A PARAGRAPH.

FINALLY LET'S ANALYZE THE OPENING AND CLOSING PARAGRAPHS. THEY HAVE THE EXCELLENT QUALITIES OF BEING BRIEF, SIMPLE AND TO THE POINT AS WELL AS INTERESTING.

LET'S TRY TO WRITE AS WE TALK. THE DAY OF STREAMLINING HAS ARRIVED. IT IS NO LONGER NECESSARY TO USE LONG WORDS AND SENTENCES. SIMPLE AND CORRECT ENGLISH IS MORE READABLE. LET'S MAKE PLAIN, READABLE WRITING THE STYLE IN OUR AGENCY !